In the Classroom of **Color**

Three schools of color advocate distinct approaches—but when all is considered, they share more similarities than differences.

BY Allison Malafronte

In art as in life, color plays an essential role in expressing vibrancy, vitality and that proverbial joie de vivre. For painters, communicating through color begins with learning its fundamental principles and properties and transferring that vocabulary to the construction of form. Artists throughout history who made significant breakthroughs in the visual understanding of color—Monet, Cézanne, van Gogh, Matisse, Kandinsky, Klee and Albers among them—influenced major movements that changed the way we continue to think about color today.

Color has also sparked centuries of heated debate, from the age-old line-versus-color argument between the Florentines and Venetians—a dispute reignited with greater fervor in the age of Ingres and Delacroix—to the once controversial Color Field approach of making color the primary subject. Indeed from the time pigments were excavated from the earth and hand ground with a mortar and pestle straight through to the CMYK language of our

Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct of the Arc River Valley (1882–85; oil on canvas, 25¾x32⅛) is by Paul Cézanne, who held that every form change is a color change. Today, artists from various schools of thought recognize his influence as a colorist.
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digital times, color has been a subject of both great significance and dispute among artists.

Today, those learning how to apply the language of color to painting or designing will encounter many of the theories and tools passed down from painters past. "Local color," "complementary" and "analogous color," "chroma," "hue," "value" and "temperature" are just some of the terms introduced to beginners, while exercises involving the Munsell color system and color-progression charts can be required of those in more advanced training, depending on the educational path a student chooses.

A full examination of color theory would fill volumes, so in this article, we'll limit ourselves to a closer look at three modern-day approaches to color that are rooted in realism—and to their connections within art history. Through these schools we learn that color is, first and foremost, a matter of seeing.

The Cape Cod School Of Art:
Creating Form Through Color Relationships

From its inception in 1899 to its official closing in the 1980s, the Cape Cod School of Art (renamed the Cape School of Art, in 1932), in Provincetown, Mass., was one of America's most influential schools of painting—and was particularly known for its teaching on color. Founded by Charles Hawthorne (1872–1930) and directed by him until his death, the school was taken over in 1932 by Henry Hensche (1899–1992), who continued to teach painters how to understand the effects of natural light on their perception of color.

Hawthorne had been a young protégé and assistant of the American impressionist William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) at the Art Students League of New York and at Chase's Shinnecock Hills Summer School of Art, on Long Island. From Chase, Hawthorne learned a tonalist approach to painting, which included a somewhat exaggerated view of color.

By the time he was leading the Cape Cod School of Art, Hawthorne had perfected a way of seeing and painting based on creating form through color relationships rather than through drawing and rendering. "Painting is just getting one spot of color in relation to another spot of color—after you have covered acres of canvas you will know," he states in the seminal book *Hawthorne on Painting*. "Let color make form—do not make form and then color it." One of the primary ways Hawthorne helped his students learn to see color was to have them paint a model outdoors, silhouetted against direct sunlight, using only a two-inch putty knife. These "mud heads," as they were called, helped students understand the effects of sunlight on color and forced them to use only large, simple masses to record what they saw.

When Hensche, who was one of Hawthorne's standout pupils, took over the school, he steered students toward a broader understanding of color. Continuing to help them see and paint light, he began their training by having them paint colored blocks stacked on tables outdoors in the sunlight. More advanced students painted still life setups—also outdoors. Observing how the shifting light and atmospheric effects changed the appearance of shapes helped strengthen the artists' observational understanding—or the art of seeing, as Hensche called it. Using a palette knife, the students would paint planes of light and shadow, and "color shapes" in relation to other color shapes in order to create the illusion of three dimensionality. Hensche believed that if you got the correct color, the value would automatically be correct (see *Late Afternoon, Still Life*, opposite).

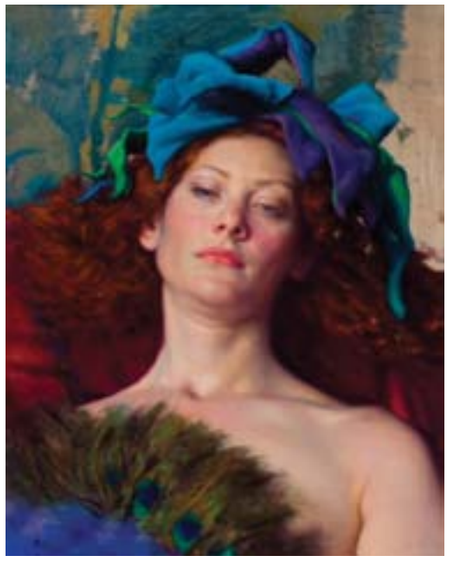
Today a cadre of seasoned painters who studied with Hensche directly continue to pass on his color teaching. One such individual is artist John Ebersberger (see *Apples, Kettle and Jug*, page ••), a student of Hensche's from 1982 to 1992, during the last 10 years of Hensche's life. Ebersberger's other influential mentor is Cedric Egeli, a traditional portraitist with a colorist's palette also derived from his close association with Hensche. "The sense of light and color in Hensche's paintings was breathtaking to me," Ebersberger says, recalling his first encounter with the influential artist's paintings, almost 40 years ago. "Through Hensche, I immediately felt a strong connection to the grand historical tradition of representational art, from the classicists up to the Impressionists." (See *Autumn Landscape*, page ••.)

Ebersberger says Hensche differed from Hawthorne in that he advanced from simply studying the silhouette of the mud head to a refined modeling of the form through color

Henry Hensche, who succeeded Hawthorne as director of the renamed Cape School of Art, simulated dimensionality with color shapes of increasingly refined color changes, as seen in **Late Afternoon, Still Life** (oil on board, 20x16).

"PAINTING IS JUST GETTING ONE SPOT OF COLOR IN RELATION TO ANOTHER SPOT OF COLOR."

—CHARLES HAWTHORNE



OPPOSITE TOP
Henry Hensche taught that correct colors assured correct values. His painting **Autumn Landscape** (oil on board, 16x20) exemplifies this concept.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT
Apples, Kettle and Jug (oil on board, 20x24), by John Ebersberger; Ebersberger studied under Hensche and Cedric Egeli, whose palette was influenced by Hensche. "When I model the form," says Ebersberger, "I strive to do so with distinct color changes, rather than tonal value changes.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT
Harlequin (oil on canvas, 20x16), by Nelson Shanks, founder of Studio Incamminati, in Philadelphia; Shanks studied with Hensche in the 1960s.
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changes, pushing beyond the simple patterns of light and shadow to creating increasingly smaller color variations. "He called the initial shapes masses, followed by smaller shapes—major variations—and finally the minor variations," says Ebersberger. "He often repeated the dictum of Paul Cézanne [1839–1906] that every form change is a color change. The method was to put down, as accurately as you could, the color that you perceive. The challenge lies in how to translate what you see in the world into the language of paint and pigments. That only comes from diligent work, careful observation and many hours painting directly from nature. Henry was a patient (and sometimes impatient!) guide on our exploration of nature's beauty, revealed through color."

Another student of Hensche was the late Nelson Shanks (1937–2015; see *Harlequin*; opposite, bottom right). In 2002, Shanks and his wife, artist Leona Shanks, co-founded Studio Incamminati (Italian for "progressing forward"), in Philadelphia, a school known for its approach to color as well as its connection to Italian art history. "The Carracci launched the Baroque period in art, which was the intersection of drawing, color and light through chiaroscuro," says Leona Shanks. "Their first school was titled Accademia degli Incamminati. By naming the school Studio Incamminati, Nelson wanted to pay homage to an important group that played a significant role in the lineage of great art."

Although Shanks studied only briefly with Hensche, in the 1960s, and developed Studio Incamminati's curriculum through several influences—including Italian classicism, French academia, Impressionism and his own training with Edwin Dickinson and John Koch—he would often send students in the 1970s and 1980s to Hensche to learn more about color. Lea Colie Wight, one of Incamminati's first graduates and an instructor at the school for 15 years, shares how one of the school's first objectives is to improve students' ability to perceive color: "Students are trained to see and paint color relationships through color-study exercises, not by color charts or mixing colors formulaically," the artist explains. "It's a reaction-based process in which colors are mixed and adjusted directly on the canvas. Ultimately, the artist develops the ability to show any relationship, even the most subtle."

Wight goes on to clarify a common misconception surrounding the school: "Studio Incamminati is known for color, which I think is great," she says. "Unfortunately the color-study examples, which are highly chromatic, are often what people associate with Incamminati—but that is a bit misleading. Color study is a stand-alone exercise and not taught as a finished stage of painting. In looking at the work today of artists who have completed the program, one can see the use of a limited palette, a chromatic palette and everything in between."

In Hawthorne's and Hensche's teaching, students were also using color studies as a means to learn how to understand visual information and cultivate a deeper sensitivity to color. "You are not here to make pictures," Hawthorne told his students. "You are here to represent by color, by separation of color, by exact matching of color, what you see and thereby learn to see."

Russian Colorists:
Realism & Impressionism Meet Modernism

Throughout history, Russian painters have stood out for both their consummate drawing ability and their dynamic use of color. Of course, not all Russian art training can be classified in one category, but there are certain presiding tenets that originate from the country's oldest and most reputable art school, the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, also known as the Repin Academy—named after one of its legendary former students Ilya Repin (1884–1930).

Leon Okun is a Russian painter, currently residing in San Diego, Calif., who studied at the Repin Academy for six years (see *Green Mood*, page ••). He feels that one of the reasons Russian painting has a distinctive approach to color is because the academy allowed the influence of Modernism while holding on to its classical roots. Whereas most art academies teach chiaroscuro, or working in values to turn the form, these instructors and artists over the last 260 years have slowly absorbed modern trends—from the optical advancements and novel paint-handling of Impressionism and the radical thinking of Cézanne to the avant garde movements of Abstraction and

Expressionism—and slowly made them part of their educational process.

Considered the grandfather of Modernism, Cézanne pioneered a revolutionary approach to seeing and portraying color and space—including creating form with color instead of value, and building up volume through gradations of color rather than linear perspective—which had far-reaching influence on numerous artists and movements around the world. "All Russian colorists came after Cézanne," Okun says. "There was a group of instructors at the Repin Academy in the 1920s and 1930s who were particularly influenced by him, and this greatly influenced the school's future teaching. In addition to being one of the first to break form, Cézanne is also attributed with giving each plane a particular color note, a concept that many important artists came to admire. Of course there were other colorists before Cézanne, but he really was one of the first to teach painters how to see."

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The Repin Academy presents other historical approaches as well, and perhaps it is this that best exemplifies the pedagogy of the academy. Multiple styles are acknowledged and explored to give the students the highest level of exposure. The academy implements its teaching in color by creating specific situations from various periods of art history. "One day the teachers might set up a Baroque still life and lighting to explore how Rembrandt used browns, whereas another day we would be painting an Impressionist view of light, while another day could be a minimalist exploration of a Modigliani-like portrait technique," Okun explains. "The colors of the background, light and objects were all chosen to help students focus on how that artist solved a particular problem, and we would paint numerous color studies until we could better understand what we were seeing."

The Kiev Art Academy in the Ukraine—which taught the Russian School of painting—turned out several important colorists as well, including those who would develop strong followings in other countries. One of those teachers was Sergei Bongart (1918–1985; see *Black and White Fish*, opposite top), a bold and expressive painter who studied with Pyotr Kotov (1889–1953). Kotov was a student of Nicolai Fechin (1881–1955), who was a student of Repin. Bongart immigrated to the United States in 1948 and began teaching students in Idaho and California. Like Hensche's students of the 1970s and 1980s, Bongart's last wave of students, now in their 60s and 70s, are still actively passing on their teacher's traditions. Don Sahli, of Colorado, who was Bongart's last apprentice (see *Lilacs in Grandmother's Vase*; opposite, bottom right), remembers the first time he observed the master colorist demonstrating: "I had never seen anyone paint with such passion," Sahli says. "Bongart used color in a way I had never seen before, attacking the canvas like a sword fighter or a boxer. I was so impressed with the amount of paint and color he used. That demo literally changed my life. I wanted to be a painter like Sergei Bongart."

Sahli moved to Los Angeles in 1982 to study with Bongart for three years, absorbing every word of his mentor's teaching. "Most artists are taught to turn the form with value, but Bongart used contrast of color (red, yellow, blue) and contrast of temperature (warm and cool), and this was new and exciting to many of his students at that time," Sahli says. "As Sergei would say, 'Contrast causes interest in a painting. Value contrast is good, color contrast is exciting to the eye. Temperature contrast is most exciting and causes and stirs great motion.' When he used the word 'motion,' he was actually trying to say 'emotion.' Bongart had a highly sensitive eye, trained to see the nuances of color and temperatures. A master of painting still lifes in natural cool light, he would say, 'Cool light comes in from the window, very beautiful, like a wonderful poem of color. The light from the light bulb is hot and warm. When I paint using warm light, it makes me feel like painting with scrambled egg—too warm, too yellow.' Bongart did not teach me how to paint—he taught me how to see. To be able to express emotion and feeling in my work through seeing color."

OPPOSITE TOP **Still Life With Catfish** (oil, 36x48) is by Sergei Bongart, who studied at the Kiev Art Academy, in the Ukraine, and traces his student-instructor lineage to Repin.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT **Green Mood** (xmediumx on xsurfacex, XXxXX) is by Leon Okun, who studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of the Arts (Repin Academy), in Russia.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT **Lilacs in Grandmother's Vase** (oil on oil on board, 36x24) is by Don Sahli, Bongart's last apprentice. "The Russian school of painting has had a tremendous effect on me as a painter," he says. "When I'm in galleries and museums, I can immediately see a painting from this school. It's like a common colorful voice or theme. The style is expressive, powerful and full of life and emotion—or, as Bongart used to say, 'motion.'"

Perceptual Painting:
Volumetric Space, Light & "Color Value"

Perceptual painting—or painting one's direct response to the visible world with a focus on space, volume, colors and shapes—is not a new concept or philosophy, but a collective of painters formed in 2008 has been creating more awareness through their Perceptual Painters website, workshops and group exhibitions.

Scott Noel, an artist from Philadelphia, who has been painting for more than 40 years and who has been an influential instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for 23 years, is one of the main exemplars of this group (see *Jan's Garden*, bottom). "Perceptual painting is more of an aspiration than an approach," he explains. "Painted engagements, with experience, can make you feel a quality of light and atmosphere, spatial depth, weight, volumetric displacement, movement, duration of attention and, implicitly, the passage and slowing of time—but none of this happens without a profound engagement with the potentialities of marks, colors and shapes on a surface."

One of the main principles of perceptual painting is challenging the assumptions of the visible world. Noel explains that, because of this, perceptual painters' experience with color is empirical rather than formulaic: "When a perceptual or observation-based painter confronts a winter sky of magnificent blue, he or she discovers, at the sky's upper reaches, a hue so deep in value, its mass feels like purple, while at the horizon, the color feels like a blue-green," he says. "As the eye moves to a shadow in the street, one finds elements of the same purple last seen in the upper sky. The color of the asphalt reflecting the sun isn't the blackish-gray color we have come to associate with asphalt, but rather, an unnamable golden pink. This is what color-finding is for me: I'm constantly guessing the color quality of every surface in a visual field and testing these guesses against my assumptions about local color. The painting becomes a hypothesis about an unexpected order in the color governed by the light. One thing every observation-based painter comes to agree on is that the real verb in color arrangements is this sense of light transforming every appearance."

Although there isn't one set approach to color in perceptual painting, Noel explains that both value-based teachers and colorists were influential to perceptual painters' thinking. "Many self-identified perceptual painters revere Edwin Dickinson [a tonalist who studied with both Chase and Hawthorne], and Dickinson continually emphasized how indebted he was to Hawthorne," he says. "Hawthorne's signature concept is the interpretation of perceptual occasions as spots of color. Dickinson's achievement is, at first, confounding when compared to Hawthorne's emphasis on color resonance, but Dickinson's grisaille tone poems remind us that, for a perceptual painter, color feeling cannot be separated from an assessment of color value. Dickinson's greatest pedagogical impact was on George Nick and Lennart Anderson, and both painters stress the crucial role of value or tonality in the interpretation of color. So, in tracing my approach to seeing color, I've developed a complex lineage that synthesizes ideas in Hawthorne, Dickinson, Nick and Anderson."

Maggie Siner, who has an equal number of years behind the canvas as Noel, is another artist who paints with a perceptual understanding of her surrounding world (see *Mini Cupcakes*, above). Splitting her time between Provence, Venice and Virginia, this painter and teacher has developed a gestural, fluid style based on the idea that shapes of color are the basic unit of seeing. "All paintings are arrangements of colored shapes on a surface," she says. "My use of color is based on the facts of visual perception and the laws of complementarity. Essentially, this means that we see colors in relation to one another. Colors are not fixed, but they change according to what is nearby, and the changes are based on contrast and complementarity. It's actually quite a complicated subject, but I propose thinking of color as three dimensional: The vertical scale is value (light to dark), the horizontal scale is color (colors of the spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet), and the depth scale is saturation or intensity (how pure or grayed out the color is)."

Siner's training began with traditional studies of drawing and value, specifically studying chiaroscuro painters such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Velázquez. She then moved on to colorists, such as Delacroix and the Impressionists, always keeping value equally calibrated with color. "Our visual perception of color changed dramatically when discoveries in optics were passed on to painters, and the creation of new saturated pigments gave Impressionists the ability to focus on color over value," she says. "Both the colors on their palettes and the canvases (working on a white canvas instead of a dark-toned ground) became much lighter, and painters emphasized color relationships over value relationships. Still, any good colorist is a great value painter first. Although we love and respond to color, the black-and-white value scale is actually the more powerful fact of visual perception. My understanding of color has evolved from these foundations, and I've developed increased sensitivity to the nuances of color change and color relationships from years of studying and seeing."

And so we return to our original premise—that color is, first and foremost, a matter of seeing.

Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York area.

BELOW
Jan's Garden (oil on linen, 68x64) is by Scott Noel, a major proponent of perceptual painting. "When I teach," says Noel, "I emphasize setting down opaque color-value notes to designate large color 'places.' The effort is to generously mix with a palette knife the note one sees and set it against other color-value notes that constitute the visual field. Taking this broadly, almost any visual occasion—still life, figure, landscape or interior—can be established pretty accurately in four or five mixtures."

ABOVE
Mini Cupcakes (oil on linen, 18x24), by Maggie Siner, emphasizes the changeability and relativity of perceived color. She takes into account three characteristics—value, hue and saturation—in her color assessments.